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Book Reviews

Ben Jones. *Beyond the State in Rural Uganda*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009. Xv + 199 pp. Maps. Appendices. ISBN: 978-0-7486-3518-4; price: £70, hardback.

Since Yoweri Museveni became Uganda's President in 1986, the East African nation has been viewed as a success story by international development and aid agencies, other governments, and academics. Uganda was once seen mainly as the site of Idi Amin's excesses, corruption, and violence. Now, it appears to outsiders as "a country transformed" through its efforts to "[promote] the signature themes of development policy and programming on the continent" (p. xiii). Museveni's National Resistance Movement (NRM) government has consistently pursued relatively progressive agendas in its approaches to the HIV/AIDS crisis, governmental decentralization, the inclusion of women in Parliament, and education.

Ben Jones' *Beyond the State in Rural Uganda* shows us a very different picture of Uganda, and in the process, forces us to reexamine any easy assumptions about the Ugandan government as a force for change in the nation-state. In the process, he offers a scathing critique of existing scholarship and development community platitudes that have largely underwritten Uganda's "success story" narratives (pp. 60-61). While conducting doctoral research on government reforms in the eastern Ugandan region of Teso in 2001, and finding little evidence of these supposed reforms, White concluded that he was asking the wrong questions. In trying to find "the state" as an actor in the Teso village of Oledai (his research site), he came to the realization that "government reforms mattered little to the people living in Oledai" (p. xiv). Moreover, he sensed that the Ugandan government had actually "withdrawn" from Teso, and instead had an "extraverted" orientation that "turned [the state] upwards and outwards by its relationship to international capital" (p. 9). Thus, despite the mythology of an ever-present Ugandan state, the government exerted little influence over the day-to-day affairs of Oledai. Jones set out to explain what he perceived as a disjuncture between the trope of the Ugandan "success story" and the realities of village life in Teso.

Jones convincingly argues that, "places like Oledai fall 'in between'" (xiv). That is, "[t]hey are situated away from those islands of development where state activities, donor projects and international capital are concentrated in Africa" (p. xiv). To explore this "in between" space, Jones' ethnographic research focused on household-level engagement with various local organizations that most affected the lives of Oledai villagers – village courts, churches, and burial societies. Using a combination of surveys, group discussions, and interviews, Jones' interdisciplinary, historically informed methodology offers a refreshing and innovative approach to development research. Most notably, Jones' work traces linkages between and across different kinds of organizations to challenge the view that "the state" is the central force in the lives of Teso residents.

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The 199-page book is divided into eight chapters, including an Introduction and Conclusion. The first three chapters outline the scholarly, anthropological, and historical terrain of the study, highlighting the limitations of past social science approaches to understanding the Iteso (peoples of the Teso region) and their recent experiences with development. Chapters Two and Three provide useful overviews of Teso's cultural practices and history. According to Jones, if Oledai today appears to be on the margins of Ugandan politics and economies, this was not always the case. In previous eras, Iteso participated in a variety of robust economies as cattle-keepers, cotton-growers, and military servicemen (15-17). The Iteso have been described in the literature as being "acephalous or 'stateless' societies, with a pattern of social organization small in scale and contingent in form (p. 34)." Unlike other peoples in southern or western Uganda, such as the Ganda, political authority in Teso was not "hierarchical or centralized (34)." Beginning in the 1890s, the Iteso became clients to the Ganda, whose relationship to early British colonizers helped them institute a kind of "sub-colonialism" over the Iteso. Formal colonial rule under the British subsequently brought major political and economic changes to Teso, turning the region into a cotton production center, and establishing coercive bureaucratic structures and hierarchical positions that had not previously existed. Yet, according to Jones, "pre-colonial forms and logics" among the Iteso continued to shape their participation in these new hierarchical political structures, somewhat softening the "seismic shift of colonial rule (p. 43)."

The author argues that "[…] the story of the Teso region needs to be told outside the dominant narrative of post-colonial Uganda" (p. 47), which tends to offer a Buganda-centric perspective on Uganda's postcolonial crises. During the 1970s and 1980s Teso, along with the rest of Uganda, experienced profound economic upheavals. Idi Amin's disastrous policies and actions – most notably, the expulsion of the South Asian population and the marked decline in global cotton prices – took a disproportionately negative toll on Teso, a center of cotton production since the 1910s. Widespread poverty struck Teso, even if political violence in the region appears to have been minimal (p. 47). Jones argues that, "[f]or Teso the post-colonial disaster started in 1986," when neighboring Karamoja began raiding Iteso cattle on a large scale. The resulting extensive cattle losses jeopardized Iteso social practices, including "marriage negotiations, judicial compensation, and the means through which youths became men" (p. 48). The NRM government also took power in 1986, so that "[c]attle raiding and Museveni's accession to power were bound together in the memory of villagers" (p. 49) by the time Jones conducted his research. As the Iteso began to feel increasingly isolated and defenseless in the face of Karamoja cattle raids, a regional resistance movement formed around popular anti-Museveni sentiment. An armed rebel movement formed, but soon splintered into numerous sub-groups. It became increasingly clear that many of those who called themselves "rebels" were actually disaffected young men whose violent attacks against local politicians registered their extreme disaffection with their socio-economic status in Teso.

The NRM government responded to the Teso insurgency by interning about half of Teso's rural population for nine months in order to sever rebel access to local sources of support (p. 53). Conditions in the camps were predictably degrading and horrific, and the insurgency and camp internment period became a significant marker in Iteso memory – a

time when "the usual pattern of village life," such as proper burials and dispute resolution mechanisms, broke down (p. 142). The insurgency ended in 1993, and was followed by the Amnesty Statute of 1987, which has been cited in the literature as "a case study in the art of conflict resolution (p. 56)." For Jones however, the end of the insurgency marks "the last time the state exerted a strong and authoritative presence in rural Teso" (56), and thus the beginning of the period of the "withdrawn state" in Teso.

In Chapters Four through Seven, Jones, explores the various ways that Iteso political and social practices have filled the space that many outsiders assume are filled by "the state." Drawing on a value system that emphasizes the central importance of seniority, prosperity, and propriety in managing village social interactions, the Iteso used institutions such as village courts, church congregations, and burial societies to restore and reinvent Teso identities after the insurgency and internment period. Jones argues that each of these institutions created meaning and new possibilities for individuals. These institutions reflect a mixture of pre-colonial and colonial-era structures and practices. For example, Oledai's village court – an autonomous local venue where both private disputes and public concerns are debated and adjudicated – has roots both in colonial-era efforts to bureaucratize and manage Oledai, as well as in Iteso historical and cultural understandings of how disputes should be settled. Similarly, Pentecostal, Anglican, and Catholic churches have taken on an "increasingly public role" (p. 131) as institutions that help villagers monitor and assert acceptable behaviors in Oledai. Burial societies formed largely as a response to the degradations of the internment period, when Iteso were unable to properly bury their dead. Burial societies now make it possible for many Iteso to afford respectable burials for their family members. These burials are also occasions that allow villagers to gather together not only to mourn, but equally importantly, to publicly demonstrate their community membership (p. 133). In addition, proper burials reinforce villagers' strong desire to move away from their traumatic past. As Jones puts it, "[t]hough burial societies worked on one level as an insurance scheme, their strength at a more fundamental level came from the fact that they managed death and opposed the memory of the insurgency" (p. 134). In short, according to Jones, "burial societies *meant* something" to Iteso villagers, and therein lies the current persistence and strength of the institution (p. 134).

Beyond the State in Rural Uganda deserves to be read widely by scholars of African politics, as well as those who study international development and aid schemes. Jones' writing is clear, passionate, and well-organized. He offers enough ethnographic and historical background for the non-expert to grasp the key issues that have shaped Teso up to the present, and he situates Teso's history against Ugandan history very effectively. His insistence on showing us the complexities of, and interrelationships between, Teso institutions and their roles in village life drives home the point that "the state" is rarely the key actor in rural life. In his last two chapters, Jones becomes somewhat repetitive in his assertion that burial societies "mattered because they *meant* something" (p. 162). His larger point – that they "acquired an ideological as well as an instrumental logic" in Oledai (p. 162) – is certainly valid and important, but the repetition of this idea led me to wonder if Jones had more to say on "meaning" as a feature in the creation and maintenance of institutions. Nonetheless, one can only hope that more scholars will take up Jones' pleas that we ask harder questions about "what constitutes development" (164), and that we challenge assumptions that "the

state" matters most in rural lives. The fascinating story of Oledai's existence *without* the state hints that there are other similar stories out there that will challenge sensibilities about the Ugandan "success story" and development politics generally.

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